

## **This is Abuse... Or is it? Domestic abuse perpetrators' responses to anti-domestic violence publicity**

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# This is Abuse... Or is it? Domestic abuse perpetrators' responses to anti-domestic violence publicity

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## Abstract

Social marketing has become a key component of policy initiatives aimed at reducing the incidence of domestic abuse. However, its efficacy remains debated, with most measures of effectiveness being somewhat crude. More subtle effects of social marketing, such as the boomerang effect whereby the message engenders the opposite effect to that intended, have been detected, suggesting a need for modes of analysis sensitive to the multiple ways in which viewers react to social opprobrium. This article attempts to deliver just this. It begins with a short history and critique of the concept of social marketing. It then proceeds to explore the utility of the more complex notion that viewers often identify with the subject positions thrown open by social marketing on a quite temporary basis, before reconfiguring them. Using the responses of domestic abuse perpetrators exposed to the UK Government's *This is Abuse* campaign film, the article shows how contradictory identifications with both anti-violence messages and victim-blaming discourses are negotiated by those young men prone to perpetrating domestic abuse. The article concludes by exploring how effectiveness might be better conceptualised and assessed with regard to the impact of anti-violence social marketing that speaks to domestic abuse perpetrators.

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boomerang effects, domestic abuse, social marketing, subject positions, violence

## Introduction

The UK Coalition Government's *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Action Plan* (Home Office, 2010: 4) places social marketing at the centre of its campaign to prevent the onset of domestic abuse. This is regarded as a cost-effective intervention, assuming that young people are generally receptive to the campaign and that changes in behaviour follow from changes in attitudes. How likely this is, however, depends at least in part upon the extent to which those who are prone to violence *identify* with the intended messages of anti-violence publicity. This process is, as we will argue, more subtle and complex than can be captured in the broad measures of the effects of social marketing that are usually called upon as evidence of the efficacy of social marketing approaches. In particular, we will suggest that the complexity of individual responses to social marketing interventions tend to be highly nuanced and dynamic. As such they are not reducible to simple measures of audience viewing figures and general opinions that appear to constitute the evidence base for central government's current approach to tackling violence against women and girls (Home Office, 2012).

The article exemplifies this point by analysing a discussion between three young men who were invited to discuss the film, *The Bedroom*, deployed in the UK Government's *This is Abuse* campaign. It then explores how the young men positioned themselves, discursively, in relation to stereotypes of incorrigible perpetrators and culpable victims. The importance of continuing the dialogue opened by social marketing with abusive young men, who are already invested in self-sufficient conceptions of masculinity, is elaborated in the article's conclusion, as is the question of how best to measure and conceptualise effectiveness in publicity campaigns addressed to those prone to violence.

## The potential and pitfalls of social marketing

While mass media campaigns to tackle violent behaviour in the home are a relatively new phenomenon, the concept of social marketing is commonly traced back to an article published in the 1970s by Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman, in which the authors appealed for the 'application of marketing concepts to social problems' (1971: 3). Kotler and Zaltman took their inspiration from two figures familiar to many criminologists – Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1949) – whose studies of the effectiveness of World War II propaganda led them to the view that audience persuasion was best maximised when three conditions were met: (1) *monopolisation* of the medium so that no counter message can be put forward; (2) *canalisation* (or enhancement) of pre-existing residues of feelings about the subject matter; and (3) the *supplementation* of the original message with a programme of face-to-face communication.

Kotler and Zaltman, by contrast, confronted a world in which it was becoming more difficult to monopolise the messages received by the public. To maximise effectiveness, Kotler and Zaltman suggested that 'social marketing' serves as 'a bridging mechanism which links the behavioral scientist's knowledge of human behavior with the socially useful knowledge of what

that implementation allows' (1971: 12). With this in mind, they encouraged social marketers to 'package' social ideas in a manner that target audiences would 'find desirable' (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971: 6); pitch their marketing in softer ways and avoid the 'hard sell'; be conversant with the places in which audiences contemplate social ideas and be sensitive to the kinds of 'cost-benefit' considerations that shape the public's willingness to 'buy' into them. Kotler and Zaltman's 'main point' was that effective social marketing requires attentiveness to the 'manner in which manageable, desirable, gratifying and convenient solutions to a perceived need or problem are presented to potential buyers' (1971: 10).

Forty years on, Kotler and Zaltman's call for a more scientifically informed approach to social marketing has been well heeded (Wakefield et al., 2010). Two distinct strands of evidence characterise the literature in relation to the operation and effectiveness of social marketing approaches. Many of the policy-oriented studies that pertain to the discouragement of dangerous driving, for example, adopt a loosely cognitive-behavioural approach that assumes that reinforcing attitudinal shifts through environmental cues and/or systems of reward is the best way of securing sustainable changes in behaviour (Cismaru and Lavack, 2009; Phillips et al., 2011). Road safety has been enhanced by: reminding drivers – through the use of billboards, radio, road safety signs and a policing presence – of messages witnessed on television; persuading them that the benefits of compliance – avoiding negative outcomes such as a collision, killing a child, frightening a passenger, disqualification from driving – far outweigh the costs of non-compliance – going without alcohol, missing a call, wearing a seatbelt, being a little late; and building a consensus around this perception among the wider public so that unsafe behaviours come to be regarded as reckless and irresponsible (Cismaru and Lavack, 2009; Phillips et al., 2011).

Conversely, social psychological studies concerned with illicit drug use, excessive alcohol consumption and unhealthy eating have tended to highlight the kinds of unintended 'boomerang' effects that social marketing campaigns can also produce. The 'reactance' that gives rise to these boomerang effects is thought to occur when people rebel against perceived compromises to their freedom, undue criticism and/or stigmatisation by actively choosing the discouraged option (Brehm and Brehm, 1981). Examples can be found in studies of the US National Anti-Drug Media Campaign (Hornik et al., 2008). These studies discovered that young people's intentions to use marijuana increased after the campaign, some individuals becoming more conscious of the threat to their freedom posed by adult authority, and others perceiving the film's implicit message to be that drug use is commonplace among young people and hence a risqué in-group activity. Similar boomerang effects have been found for 'parent focussed' anti-tobacco adverts and for campaigns that convey the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption (Clayton et al., 2011; Wakefield et al., 2006), with teenagers interpreting the overt warning from adults that one does not need to smoke and drink to fit in with one's peers as evidence that both enhance popularity among friends. They have also been detected in studies of the impact of healthy eating campaigns in the US where the legacy of racial stereotyping was insufficiently anticipated. One such study found that African Americans from low socio-economic groups came subsequently to identify 'dieting' as 'white' behaviour – the status symbol of a condescending outgroup – to be actively resisted by indulging in calorific food (Oyserman et al., 2007).

## Social marketing and domestic violence

Most studies of anti-domestic abuse campaigns – of which there have been many – are insufficiently sophisticated to shed much light on the nature of the effects of social marketing, few evaluations going any further than the measurement of viewing figures and the extent of recollection of advert content (Donovan and Vlasis, 2005). For example, the UK Government's *This is Abuse* campaign of 2010–2012 sought to encourage teenagers to rethink their views of acceptable violence, abuse or controlling behaviour in relationships, directing them to sources of help and advice by exposing them to a series of short films available online, screened at cinemas and on national television. How successful the campaign has been, however, remains unverified, as all that has been made public from the findings of the unpublished evaluation the Home Office has drawn upon to justify its continuation are viewing figures and an opinion poll conducted after the campaign. In *Taking Action: The Next Chapter*, for example, it is reported that the evaluation surveyed 800 young people, 'eight out of ten' of whom thought that the campaign made them:

more likely to do something about an abusive relationship if they or a friend were in one. Over two-thirds of all respondents agreed with a statement that abuse in relationships is a serious issue. This figure increased to eight in ten among those who were spontaneously aware of the advertising. (Home Office, 2012: 11)

It is not possible to know whether this is a positive outcome, as we are not told what these 800 people said before they were exposed to the films that were the core of the campaign (i.e. no pre-test data was reported). And additional questions may be asked of these particular results. Why, for example, having been exposed to the campaign, do one-third of young people remain of the view that violence in relationships is not serious? Why would one-fifth of those who spontaneously remembered the campaign still do nothing if someone they knew was suffering abuse? What rendered this sizeable minority apparently unresponsive to the campaign's message? The posts on the *This is Abuse* website are highly suggestive in this regard. They reveal that many young people were shocked by the coercion exposed in the campaign, and that many young women began to recognise personal experiences as abusive through engagement with it. However, there were also some young men who concluded that the films were sexist in some way, and a minority took this sexism as indicative of wider discrimination against young men. The following comments posted on the website exemplify the point:

- Tony:** Coercing someone into having sex is never acceptable, but just for a second imagine how frustrating it is for a boy. You go out with a girl, you spend time and money on her, and when you want to be really intimate with her she doesn't want to...Sex isn't just for pervs... and men need sex to feel loved more than women. So a distinction must be made between 'coercion' and communicating what you want. (04/03/2010)
- Ben:** Every one of these videos highlight how terrible males act towards females. Sexist and totally out of order. (07/03/2010)
- Steve:** Example #1 – The male is the abuser, the girl is the abused. What a surprise... (14/03/2010)

By contrast, in Scotland, where the effects of anti-violence publicity have been monitored through tracker surveys since the 1990s, there is some evidence to support *both* positive effects and boomerang hypotheses. On the one hand, successive tracker surveys in Scotland have discovered falling rates of domestic abuse in the months when social marketing campaigns run, amidst decreasing acceptance of it (Solomon and Fraser, 2009; TNS, 2005). In 2009, 97% of adults in Scotland disagreed with the statement that 'it is okay to abuse your partner once in a while', while 83% supported the assertion that 'Anybody who abuses their partner should be treated with contempt' (Solomon and Fraser, 2009: 17, 20). But on the other hand, there are many among those who now think domestic abuse is wrong who think that victims are also to blame for their victimisation. Over a quarter of Scottish adults still believe that women who are drunk are mostly or entirely responsible if they are raped (Solomon and Fraser, 2009: 20).

Indeed, there is some evidence, dating back to the very first evaluations of the *Zero Tolerance* poster campaign that ran in Scotland in the early 1990s, of a degree of psychological reactance, or boomerang effects, among small subsections of the population. Survey research conducted at the time suggested that the campaign's message that there are 'no excuses' for abuse was positively welcomed by the vast majority of people who observed it in Scotland (MacKay, 1996). Nevertheless, men (12%) were six times less likely than women (2%) to be positive about the campaign's message (Hunt and Kitzinger, 1996; Kitzinger, 1994). Qualitative research with particular audience segments discovered that receptivity was related to the extent to which people felt the campaign recognised their experience. On the one hand, some incest survivors commented on how affirming they found it to have their experiences validated by the posters. On the other hand, some people described the campaign's focus on gender as 'divisive'. For some men this was undoubtedly because they felt there were legitimate excuses that could be made for violent behaviour. However, there were also men who felt they were only located in the campaign material as potential rapists when they – as brothers, partners and fathers – were actively concerned about the violence perpetrated against women whom they cared for (Kitzinger, 1994). A boomerang reaction was actively cultivated a year later as some senior Conservatives and the editor of the *Sunday Times* depicted the campaign as 'anti-male' and likened it to a 'Goebbels-style exercise in hate propaganda' (Hunt and Kitzinger, 1996: 58–9).

On the basis of these examples, one might therefore surmise that the success or otherwise of any particular social marketing campaign to tackle domestic violence is going to depend not only on whether those men prone to perpetrating domestic violence perceive 'manageable, desirable, gratifying and convenient' alternatives to their behaviour (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971: 10) but also on whether they identify with the wider social opprobrium such campaigns cultivate, or react against it. Such questions are not easy to address using methods that seek to quantify a 'typical' snapshot response through the aggregation of answers to survey questions, important as this quantification is to the process of evaluation. Rather, what is needed in addition to this are approaches that are sensitive to the ways in which audiences identify with the characters and messages conveyed in social marketing. These identifications are likely to shift during and after viewing, depending on the viewer's perceptions of victimhood and heroism (much like audience reactions to Hollywood blockbuster films; Sparks, 1996) as well as how much they resonate with their own life narrative as they re-cogitate the meaning of what they have seen. This question of how we identify with the subject positions of others has long been articulated in film studies as a dynamic process involving both othering and active desire (see Butler and Drakeford (2008) and

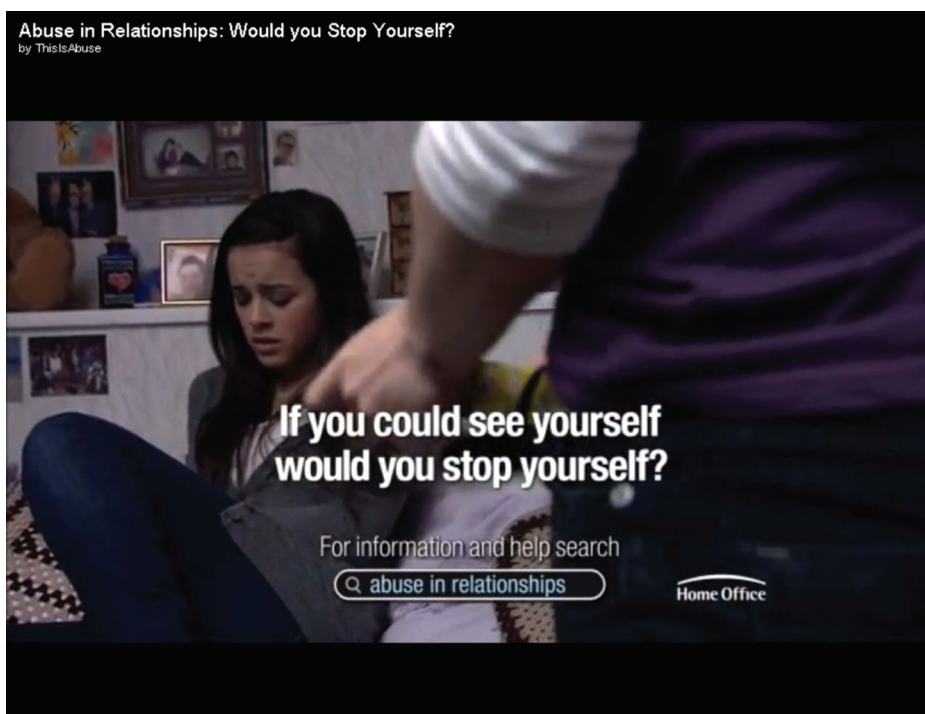
Peelo (2006) for how 'otherness' and especially 'victimhood' can be constructed and managed through a variety of other authorial techniques in the print media). This process is artfully illustrated in Silverman's (2000) analysis of how the matrix of shot/reverse shot formations – in which the viewer is presented with a 180-degree view, before it is reversed – in the film *Psycho* entice the viewer into a most disturbing sequence of identifications: with the female victim, with the killer, Norman Bates, and with the voyeur of murderous male violence against a woman in a shower. Stuart Hall (2000: 19, emphases in original) articulates the complex nature of the *identification* this entails in more sociological prose when he insists that:

Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us... They are the result of a successful articulation or 'chaining' of the subject into the flow of discourse... The notion that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an *articulation* rather than a one-sided process, and that in turn places *identification*, if not identities, firmly on the theoretical agenda.

Refashioned in this way, media effects are always going to be much more temporary than evaluation research typically assumes, surveys capturing only a moment in the ongoing articulation of a chain of meaning, which the viewer may accentuate if the discursive subject position resonates comfortably; may reject if the resonance is too much; or may otherwise ignore if the fit is poor. In what follows, we want to argue that this issue of identification and how it impels us towards the *flow of particular discursive* subject positions pertaining to the use of violence needs to be recognised if we are to fully understand the impact of campaigning that addresses those prone to perpetrating domestic abuse. We illustrate this point with reference to the UK Government's *This is Abuse* Campaign, including what has been reported about its effects and the responses to it that we garnered using a focus group method.

The centrepiece of the UK Government's recent *This is Abuse* campaign was the film *The Bedroom*, directed by BAFTA award winner Shane Meadows. Meadows has achieved significant acclaim, most notably for his film *This is England* and its televised follow-ups. His films are remarkable for their uncompromisingly realist approach to social problems, grasped through characters who are both likeable and damaging, flawed but redeemable, stuck in the moment but struggling and sometimes able to change in the longer term, often as a consequence of confrontation that exposes unacknowledged dependency on significant others. The film that Meadows produced for the *This is Abuse* campaign is similarly sophisticated. Audiences are presented with two ordinary, pleasant-looking teenagers in a potentially romantic situation which turns aggressive when the young woman declines her boyfriend's invitation for 'a bit of fun' before her parents get back. The girl notes 'what always happens' in such circumstances and the boy responds by threatening to 'tell everyone' she is 'frigid', asserting, despite her protestations to the contrary, that she 'basically... is being [frigid] now'. A succession of shot/reverse shot formations invite identification with both characters as the tension mounts. The girl receives a text message from one of her friends; the young man throws her phone across the room in anger, twisting her arm when she protests. The girl asks if she is 'not even allowed friends now', to which he retorts, 'I thought I was your mate?' The scene ends with the young man telling his girlfriend she is 'pathetic', unfastening his belt, and suggesting that she will need to 'put some work in' to turn him on. As he insists she 'show' him 'something', the camera swings to the bedroom window – until this point hidden





**Figure 1.** An image from the UK Government Home Office's *This is Abuse* campaign.

from view – where the young man is banging on the glass from outside, shouting 'Get off her. Get off her'. The film concludes with the message 'If you could see yourself would you stop yourself?' displayed across the screen (Figure 1).

An alternative version of the film concludes with footage of the *girl* banging on the bedroom window from outside, shouting 'What are you doing?', before the message 'If you could see yourself, would you see abuse?' is flashed across the screen. In both versions, the film directs the viewer to a website [<http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk/>], with options for posting comments, contact details for relevant support organisations, and images of a poster campaign – run nationally – with slogans such as 'Do you make your girlfriend weak at the knees?' and 'Are you a dream boyfriend by day and a control freak by night?'. Thus the campaign has tried to address the general audience of young people, male and female, encouraging them to see abusive behaviour as just that, and recognising that many may already have encountered abusive behaviour in intimate relationships.

## Method

The research we report here derives from a three-year study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The *From Boys to Men* project involved measuring the attitudes of 1200 young people towards domestic violence, an evaluation of a schools-based intervention, and one-to-one biographical interviews with 30 young men who had been victims of, witnesses to



or perpetrators of domestic violence. It also involved focus groups with 13 pre-existing groups of young people aged between 13 and 19 years. These included four school-based groups of pupils (two all-male groups and two mixed-gender groups) who had been exposed to an education programme on healthy relationships and domestic abuse. A further two groups – one all-male and one mixed-gender – comprised young people attending an alternative education programme. The remaining seven groups of all-male respondents are described concisely as follows: (1) exclusively South Asian; (2) gay and/or bisexual; (3) attendees at a substance misuse programme; (4) witnesses to domestic abuse between parents/carers; (5) young offenders; (6) schoolboys attending an anger management programme; and (7) domestic abuse perpetrators. We have published elsewhere a thematic overview of what all the groups said (Corr et al., 2012) alongside reports on the findings of earlier stages of the project (Fox et al., forthcoming; Gadd et al., 2012).

Focus groups have, in recent years, been more widely used to elicit information from children and young people about violence (Burman and Cartmel, 2005; Burton et al., 1998) – a topic which in some instances may be taboo (Kitzinger, 1995; Mauthner, 1997) as well as exciting, and is sometimes more easily approached indirectly through debate addressed to hypothetical examples rather than by questions addressed to children's actual experiences. This was the approach we adopted in the focus groups we conducted. In each instance the groups were shown the version of the film that concluded with the young man banging on the window from the outside. Participants were asked for their reflections on the film, before being presented with two further vignettes: one of a young couple where the man threatens his partner because of how she is dressed for a night out with her friends; and another where a young man is in trouble at school for calling a girl 'a slag' and pushing her.

The use of the film and vignettes provided the groups with concrete examples of people and their behaviour, on which participants could offer comment and opinion (Hazel, 1995), allowing an exploration of potentially sensitive topics without participants having to refer to their own personal experiences. Participants were also asked for their reflections about domestic abuse in different couple groupings – older and younger couples, couples from different ethnic groups, same-sex couples – and to advise what they would do for young people 'if they were in charge'. Focus group interviews typically lasted for around 50 minutes with groups comprising between three and eight participants and actively co-facilitated by both Mary-Louise Corr (lead) and David Gadd (scribe). All focus group discussions were fully transcribed. We approached the analysis by first identifying the predominant discursive fields through which participants navigated their answers, and then following particular individuals through the transcripts to see how their discursive positionings shifted.

The remainder of this article focuses on reactions to the film as revealed in discussion with three young men, Robert, Danny and Mike, each of whom is known to have perpetrated abuse against a partner. By paying close attention to the detail of the dialogue, and how it unfolds, we seek to illustrate the complexity of the reactions that can ensue when viewers discover something of themselves in social marketing. This, as we show, necessitates interpretive attention to what viewers mean when they comment on the content and characters contained in social marketing. In particular, we note the apparent contradictions that emerge in conversation that sometimes reveal subtle identifications of which viewers are not fully aware.

## Findings

### Shocking behaviour

In every group where we showed young people the film, *The Bedroom*, the initial response was of universal condemnation. 'Shocking' was the most common response, participants often remarking that the actors in the film were of similar age to themselves. Other words used included 'nasty', 'violent', 'aggressive', 'controlling', 'senseless', 'powerful' and 'bad'. Often participants went on to suggest that the young man in the film was motivated by 'paranoia', 'insecurity', selfishness, possessiveness, and/or suspicions about his girlfriend's fidelity. Some condemned the young man as a 'control freak' or 'mental', but others noticed that the boy looking in from the outside was 'ashamed of what he was doing' and 'desperate to stop'. In one of the schools-based focus groups where participants had recently completed a programme of healthy relationship education, several boys said outright that the film would make them 'think', *if* they had hit someone.

But what of those who were known to us to have assaulted a girlfriend? How would exposure to the bedroom scene make them think, feel, or act? Robert, Danny and Mike were three men aged 16, 16 and 17, respectively. All three were under Youth Offending Team supervision for assault, and had disclosed to their supervising officers that they had committed acts of violence against women. Despite this, all three insisted that they had 'no idea' why they had been encouraged to partake in a focus group on domestic abuse when we introduced ourselves. We learned, in the course of our discussions, that Danny and Robert had a history of exclusion from school and of living in institutional care. Both, as we were to learn, were now attending single-sex schools. Mike, who at the very least had knowledge of the kind of provision young people receive in care and the right to social housing of those without anywhere to live, revealed less about his own experiences. Illicit drug use appeared to be a particular feature of Danny's life. His parents too were apparently both drug users.

### Condemning the calculative perpetrator

As in other groups, the discussion with Robert, Danny and Mike began with expressions of condemnation for a perpetrator whose actions were deemed unjustifiable because, as Danny was to assert, 'you just don't hit birds'. This seemingly simple formulation, variants of which Danny was to repeat four further times during the discussion, does not, it should be noted, exclude the use of violence *per se*. Rather it is premised on the argument that women are *birds* and hence vulnerable and in need of protection. A real man would not hit a 'bird', but would be perfectly justified in attacking another man who had been callous enough to do so.

**Robert:** I've seen this...

**Danny:** It's grim like...Just fuckin' you don't hit birds do you, you know what I'm saying. Just think you know that could be your own kid or anything, just scag like isn't it?

**Robert:** Harsh. [...]

**MLC:** How would you feel if it was your kid?

**Mike:** I'd kill them me. Some lads just think they can take advantage of other people... They're stronger... so they feel like that they can do stuff like that.

As this dialogue reveals, the boys began the discussion by identifying with a character looking in on the bedroom, but not the boy's alter ego as intended by the filmmaker. Having asserted that if the girl were his 'daughter' – i.e. he were her father – he would kill the boy, or at the very least do as Robert suggested and 'snap' the boy's legs, Mike challenged David Gadd to confirm that he would do something similar.

**Mike:** If you seen a girl being battered by a man, wouldn't you go over?

**DG:** Possibly not.

Not convinced by David's tentatively negative response, Mike proceeded to put the matter more forcefully – 'You'd have to'. He and Robert then emphasized just how perniciously calculating and controlling men who batter (younger) girls tend to be. In Robert's words, the threatening behaviour was directed at ensuring the boy 'got his way' sexually with the girl, the term 'smash' used colloquially (and perhaps also tellingly) to refer to intercourse. In so doing, they positioned themselves as selfless heroes, intellectually adept enough to know a perpetrator when they saw one and physically able enough to take him on.

**Robert:** ...he done that because he wanted to smash her but she were having none of it. So he got his own way you know what I mean.

**Mike:** Put the shifts up her basically.

**Robert:** Yeah.

**Mike:** So he can get what he wants.

As we shall show in due course, Mike's rallying of the boys to the subject position of men who would seek retribution against those who are violent towards women set in motion a discussion in which they felt able to elaborate on just what kind of men the real perpetrators of domestic abuse are. But this was only after Robert and Danny had begun to question the integrity of the woman in the film.

## Sympathy for the harmless sexual aggressor

Once they had begun to identify the young male actor in the film as a potential offender at risk of criminalisation, Robert and Danny's assessment of him began to change. As Robert's opening 'You'd be' in the extract below implies, these focus group participants soon began to see the film primarily as about what might happen to them personally.

**Robert:** You'd be fucked if she rang the plod.

**Danny:** Get nicked for raping her and that.

**Robert:** Or a sex offenders list. [laughing]

While the young male actor's behaviour in the film left our interviewees in little doubt that coerced sexual activity would have followed, to our surprise, given what they had said before, at this point in the discussion Robert and Danny began to identify so closely with the boy in the film that they proceeded to rationalise his behaviour.

- DG:** You think he's going to rape her?
- Danny:** No he's not going to rape her, but basically that's what you [get] nicked for isn't it if she phoned the plod.
- DG:** Do you think that's what was going to happen?
- Danny:** No. He was just going to shag her or something.
- Robert:** [laughing]

Having declassified the impending coerced sex as just a 'shag or something', Robert and Danny went on to depict the young male actor's behaviour as 'bad' but not 'extreme': 'it could have been a lot worse'. The young man they had only minutes earlier construed as a calculating villain deserving of a lethal lesson in how not to treat women was thus reimagined as the innocent party in an everyday bedroom encounter that was neither serious nor especially abusive. The invocation of what might happen if such a girl 'rang the plod' began another chain of signification in which real abuse was defined as something involving violence that was sufficiently extreme to be unambiguous in terms of who was to blame, and in which it became permissible to behave in a threatening way towards a girl who made an allegation of rape against a boy who had done no more than 'shag' her.

- MLC:** Do you think this scenario in the video... is a typical example of domestic abuse?
- Robert:** No there's usually loads.
- Mike:** There's cheating like, just cheating like loads.
- Robert:** Or like, you'd see... they'd start punching them in the face...
- Mike:** It could have been worse though.
- Robert:** It weren't extreme but it was bad like...
- Mike:** He could have raped her or something, couldn't he? Scared her or something. So it could have been a lot worse.
- Robert:** In other words he scared her so she wouldn't ring the police.

In identifying with the boy's risk of criminalisation, our focus group participants thus began to applaud the very instrumental aggression they had originally condemned. Having identified first with a vigilante father who would set about challenging violent men through physical confrontation, Robert, Danny and Mike subsequently identified with a young man whose sexual coercion was redefined as no more than a 'shag'. Such a young man would inevitably wish to avoid a report to the police and/or being put on the 'sex offenders register', and hence might be justified in 'scaring' his victim by calibrating his aggression. Indeed, as we learned at the very end of the focus group discussion, Robert appeared to see himself in this latter light, asking if we had heard about 'stupid' girls who 'chat shit and lie to the police' after they and a boy had only been 'messaging about'. In redefining this potential sexual assault as merely a 'shag', Robert, Danny and Mike were different from the rest of our focus group participants, none of whom proceeded down the path of justifying coercion and harm minimisation in order to reduce the likelihood of a report to the police.

## The woman scorned and the paranoid freak

The unpredictability of women provided the boys with a discursive link from talking about controlling men to women's violence. The group was unanimous that cheating by men was a frequent

cause of domestic abuse perpetrated by women. Robert reflected, 'Birds start throwing plates at you and that.' Mike responded, 'When you cheat, girls just slap you... You just expect that though from girls.' The important thing when being assaulted by a woman, both Mike and Robert argued, was not to retaliate physically. Echoing Danny's opening edict, Mike insisted you should 'Just leave her to it', 'You can't do anything', 'No matter... you don't hit a girl, do you?', 'Just let her do whatever she wants and see what happens.' A 'slap' from a girl was to be expected if you had done 'something' wrong, but retaliation, especially in front of children, was not acceptable. Robert took the view that not retaliating physically could be humiliating for women: 'Birds can't do that much damage to you. I'd just laugh at them', and that one might be better off just moving rapidly 'on to the next one'. Mike agreed, suggesting he too would 'laugh at her', letting her know what an 'idiot' she was. But then Danny suggested a third way of making light of the situation, with which Robert and Mike laughingly concurred: 'Feed her major weed and watch her go to sleep. When she wakes up in the morning... she will have forgotten about it.'

This distinction between these masculinity-affirming manifestations of being in control whatever the provocation and unmanly aggression motivated by the fear of being out of control – being, as Danny captured it, 'a paranoid little freak' – re-emerged as our participants were presented with a vignette about a man who threatens his girlfriend because he does not like the way she is dressed for a night out with her friends.

**Danny:** He's got her on lockdown hasn't he?

**Robert:** Lockers.

**DG:** What does that mean?

**Mike:** Can't do nothing like.

**Danny:** No.

**Robert:** She can't do nothing unless he says....

**Mike:** There's no trust then, is there? ... It's not really a relationship that though is it?

**Robert:** I bet you he's got more birds... Cos he's got her on lockdown so and he's eighteen, she's only sixteen...

**Danny:** Just a nonce... He's fucking her about... just bullying her basically.

Condemnation of this bullying by a paranoid and older man – a potential sex offender or 'nonce', controlling his girlfriend, keeping her on 'lockdown', 'fucking her about' because of his own infidelity – was unambiguous. It was also, it seemed, close enough to the truth to prompt Danny to remind again that 'hitting a bird is wrong', something he would 'never' do, denials that ultimately exposed an untruth in this persistent refrain.

**Danny:** I just think hitting a bird is wrong or. I never hit my bird me. Never hit a bird in me life. Don't get me wrong, I have hit her like but not like proper. Only messing around like banter... Never hit her to hurt her.

This confession was greeted with endorsement from Mike, who concurred that violence is both just what happens in a relationship, and is sometimes necessary to make it sufficiently 'exciting' or 'kinky'.

**Mike:** It's what happens isn't it.

**Danny:** Yeah just a bit of banter isn't it.

**DG:** So you think sometimes it happens to make it more exciting, the relationship?

**Robert:** More exciting?

**Danny:** Yeah you're just messing around aren't you? Just give her just like a light little jig or something... She slaps you and all that, you know what I mean. Just like messing around just fuckin' getting, hitting each other with the pillows and that. You know what I'm saying, it's proper kinky, isn't it? [all laughing]

By this point in our conversation, the chaining of subject positions around violence had taken the boys some way from the young woman's fear of victimisation and the disquiet of the boy looking in on himself, the group's hasty discursive retreat causing them to stumble upon a peculiar consensus built around the notion that 'hitting' and 'slapping' is just what happens, the kind of innocent pillow fighting that makes a relationship 'proper kinky'.

### Untrustworthy women and predatory scumbags

Kinkiness had, as we were to discover, its place. Returning to the motives of women who dress up for a night out with friends, Robert and Mike wanted to know what if she were 'like a slag: little skirt, boobs out and all that'. In such circumstances, Mike said he would tell such a girl 'straight' that she would not be 'going out': 'She's the one causing shit. There's going to be tears.' Danny, by contrast, said he would require the girl to explain 'what the fuck' her 'game' was so as to be able to exact revenge on any boy who took advantage.

**Danny:** [If I] found out that she's done anything I'd go and snap the lad's neck for him and then go and tell her to go and fuck off.

A girl who dresses up for a night out with her friends was thus constructed discursively as either not to be trusted or otherwise so naive about the kind of attention her attire might attract that she would have to be told to stay in or change. It was against the naivety of some women that the dangerousness of other men was then fully elaborated.

**Mike:** Some people are scumbags though aren't they?

**Robert:** But there's some proper mad men.

**Danny:** Think they're mad and all go and hit a bird.

**Robert:** Like have you seen it was in the [local newspaper] the other day. Some man shot his wife and his kids. What's the point in that?

Asked specifically if they thought the issues around domestic abuse affected people from Black or Asian backgrounds differently to white people, Robert, Danny and Mike were at first unsure. However, they swiftly moved to catalogue racist stereotypes that re-established their collective investment in tackling men who are *really* abusive towards women, i.e. those who 'batter' them, 'terrorise' them, as well as 'looking down' on them:

**Danny:** No, it would just be same wouldn't it but in a different language.

**Robert:** [laughing]

**Mike:** Or like that voodoo and all that shit. Them people that

**Danny:** Them Somalians and all.

**Mike:** Them type of religions that just terrorise women, don't they?

**Danny:** Yeah they look down on them and all, don't they?

**Robert:** Isn't it like in their religion that they can tell their wives what to do and that or something. And if they cheat they're allowed to batter them in their religion.

**Mike:** East is East, that type of thing.

In sum the real problem became 'proper mad men' who, unlike Danny, 'would hit a bird', crazed gunmen who kill their wives and kids, unprincipled 'scumbags', and religious minorities with whom one cannot reason, who terrorise women, and whose faiths instruct them that they can 'batter' women with impunity. Heroically righting these wrongs was one way in which these domestic abuse perpetrators came to see themselves in the aftermath of watching the film, *The Bedroom*; a fantasy, as we will now show, that protected them from a more troubling but biographically specific set of recognitions.

## Looked-after kids, looking after themselves

When asked explicitly to explore what should happen to a boy who had called a girl 'a slag' at school before pushing her, Robert, Danny and Mike suggested first that schools tend to overreact to such behaviour.

**Robert:** No, that's not really a big deal though. Just a push. It's not like...

**Danny:** ...She might be a slag.

**MLC:** So what do you think a headteacher would do?

**Robert:** Fuckin' exclude him.

**Mike:** He'd exclude him for about a day or two.

This, it turned out, was not a scenario that was entirely unfamiliar to Robert and Danny, who had both been moved into secure educational facilities. Robert explained that they are 'not allowed girls' in their school 'in case we smash them'. This was to Danny's disappointment, he having 'wanted to go to a mixed' school, like his 'mates', but was presumably regarded as too much of a risk. Presented with the possibility that the boy in the vignette was himself living with abusive parents, Robert, Danny and Mike all agreed that in this situation the headteacher should do something. They disagreed, however, as to whether involving social services would necessarily prove beneficial. Assuming that this was a boy whose parents were drug users like his own – 'smack-heads' or 'crazy lemo heads' – who had been 'violent towards' the boy, Danny proposed a care order as the only solution. Mike, conversely, feared the boy would 'miss' his parents if taken 'away' from them, before Robert advised that life in a care home might be okay. Where the three young men came to a consensus was around their belief that 'scumbag' social workers would probably fail to deliver an enduringly stable outcome for the boy.

**DG:** Do you think... it could worse for this boy... to be separated from his parents...?

**Danny:** Yeah but it doesn't matter if he's gonna miss his parents... He's going to be safe... He might not even be getting looked after properly. He might not even be getting fed or anything.



- Mike:** It depends on where he goes. If he goes into a care home or something or gets adopted or something like that.
- Robert:** No, care homes are all right you know... [But] you don't want the social services involved, they're scum. Cos the stuff they do like. They're just little scumbags aren't they? They just move you around, getting you in secure units... They can rule your life and that.
- Danny:** Terrorise.

Having characterised social workers as 'scumbags', Danny and Mike ultimately concluded that fending for oneself was the better option.

- Danny:** Or just go and fuckin' fend for yourself. Just go and move out and go to the job [centre] and say 'I've nowhere to live'... Get a house off them... Get a job. Get your fuckin bird... You know what I'm saying, you've smashed it then like...
- Mike:** It would be better for him like. Wouldn't it? Get himself a bird and that.

Thereafter, Mike and Robert took the view that there was nothing to be done if the boy continued to be violent. It would become a 'private' matter with which no-one else should get involved, or, as Robert concluded, 'just their way of living', something that would not change even through punishment.

- Mike:** You can't really get involved in relationships can you? It's got nothing to do with you.
- MLC:** So you think it's something that's private then that people shouldn't get involved in?
- Mike:** Isn't it though?
- DG:** What do you think would help him to stop?
- Robert:** Nothing. They're like that aren't they? That's just their way of living.

## Discussion

We think the above extracts illustrate something of the complexity of the issues that need to be grappled with when social marketing is positioned as the cornerstone of domestic abuse prevention work. *The Bedroom*, sophisticated as it is, evokes a complex and subtle range of reactions among young men who have been violent to female partners, including condemnation, sympathy, denial and confession, paternalism and protective feelings, amidst misogynistic woman-blaming. These reactions are much more complex than the post-viewing opinions currently collated by government evaluators, and cannot be readily conceptualised as a single 'effect'. The young men we interviewed were genuinely troubled by the film they watched. They found it 'grim'. But what they found 'grim' about it shifted as they identified fleetingly with the victim, the perpetrator at risk of criminalisation, and with a version of the viewing subject looking in.

More akin to a succession of ricochets than a single boomerang effect, we witnessed three teenage male perpetrators construct a series of subject positions that took them away from their starting premises that 'it is wrong to hit birds' and that one really ought to intervene should one witness a man behaving in this way. Raw nerves were touched as our participants avoided admitting what they themselves had done. Instead of admitting to being perpetrators, they assumed the safer subject position of masculine protector and moral guardian, identifying threats

– ‘scumbags’ and ‘slags’ – that made imperative the presence of men, adept in the measured use of physical force and morally skilled in differentiating between those deserving and undeserving of its application. Then, as they began to identify with the boy whom they assumed, albeit briefly, was at risk of being reported for rape, Robert, Danny and Mike attempted to navigate this precarious moral terrain by redefining coerced sex as merely a ‘shag’, liable to be misconstrued by ‘stupid birds’ who tell lies. They argued that it could have been ‘worse’, not only for the girl, but also for the boy should she make a ‘false’ allegation. In such circumstances, the boy’s competence in provoking enough fear in his victim to avoid being reported to the police, while not inflicting more injurious violence, was noted as an effective means of avoiding criminalisation. Such behaviour could not necessarily be criticised or conceived of as morally wrong or even abusive.

Perhaps unsettled by their troubling identification with a young man behaving in this way, and/or the interviewers’ sceptical probing around it, Robert, Danny and Mike pointed to groups of men who present a much greater danger to women. ‘Mad’ men, ‘scumbags’, ethnic minorities and Islamic zealots were identified as the real abusers, the real problem, as deserving of greater moral opprobrium and physical retribution. Against this backdrop, all three of our participants regarded the subject positions of the capable father and protective boyfriend – discouraging women from dressing like slags, exacting revenge on men who take advantage, and tackling the ‘paranoid little freaks’ who keep women on ‘lockdown’ – as enhancing their own sense of what it is to be a man. That their stereotypes of abusive men and their idealization of good fathers appeared to jar somewhat with their own actual experiences only became apparent at the end of the focus group discussions.

What this disjunction exposed, however, was the need to continue the dialogue opened up by *The Bedroom* in ways that were responsive to our participants’ particular life experiences. Danny’s remarks about the security of institutional care relative to the dangers of living with abusive and neglectful drug-using parents seemed to us to be informed by more than mere speculation, as did Mike’s observations about the fear an abused boy might nonetheless have about being separated from his parents by social services. These final reactions revealed something of the extent to which our participants’ vulnerability was actively avoided in all their bravado statements about tackling other men and challenging girls who are ‘slags’. It exposed also the limitations and the irony of the solutions they envisaged. Ultimately a young man in trouble for assaulting a girl he had called a ‘slag’ would have to ‘fend’ for himself, by getting a job, a house and a ‘bird’. He would, as Danny surmised, only survive homelessness, estrangement and poverty with the support of a woman: ‘you’ve smashed it then like’. Ultimately, the ‘bird’ who had been ‘smashed’ but not ‘raped’, ‘hit’ but not ‘hurt’, told not to dress like a ‘slag’, and given drugs to stupefy her or appease her anger at her boyfriend’s infidelity, was imagined as the person most likely to save them from the multiple ills of social isolation, social exclusion and criminalisation, as long as she understood that domestic violence was both a ‘private’ matter and a ‘way of life’.

## Conclusion

Such reactions do not – as the UK Government Equalities Office’s (2011) *Guide to Good Practice Communications* tends to assume – mean that the population of domestic abuse perpetrators

are untouchable by social marketing, that their eyes are 'closed' to domestic abuse, that their attitudes are universally supportive of domestic abuse, and that they will only be deterred by being socially isolated and then fully appraised of the penalties for perpetrating abuse. But nor do they mean, as the Government's *Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan* tends to assume, that social marketing will provide a simple, almost stand-alone, method for preventing the development of violent proclivities among young men (Home Office, 2010, 2012). Rather, these reactions suggest that we understate both the challenge and the possibilities for overcoming domestic abuse if we think only in terms of attitudes measured through snapshot surveys, as though such attitudes were fixed, bounded and enduring. Engagement with individuals already familiar with both punishment and social isolation needs to be alive to the complexity of the discursive subject positions men occupy around violence, how they are chained together, and what they conceal. This does not necessarily undermine Kotler and Zaltman's (1971: 6) argument that the effects of social marketing are facilitated by 'a stepdown communication process' in which the 'message is passed on and discussed in more familiar surroundings'; however, we need to be conscious of just how and where the meaning of anti-domestic abuse campaigning is re-articulated, for its message is easily distorted by those most uncomfortable about seeing themselves in it.

In the field of domestic abuse prevention, key challenges involve how best to supplement the central media message – universally agreed upon by perpetrators and non-perpetrators alike – that domestic violence is wrong, with dialogue that avoids canalising reactions in terms of a succession of denials that construe the whole agenda as 'sexist' and/or displace blame onto loose women and 'scumbags', whether 'paranoid freaks' or even social workers. Such reactions underline the risks social marketing campaigns run of further ostracising the many already stigmatised young people in trouble for assaulting family members or intimate partners. But they also provide a clue to the complexity of the discursive shifts that have to be negotiated in order for such people to see their behaviour as abusive, and for anyone to help them do something about it. Without this form of identification with attitudes and actions that they themselves construe as actually or potentially abusive, potential or actual abusers are unlikely to want to seek out 'manageable, desirable, gratifying and convenient solutions' to relationships liable to become damaging and dangerous in the future (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971: 10). In this regard the potential of social marketing is perhaps greater than ever, but only if it is extensively supplemented with the efforts of those willing and able to work in responsive ways with those accepting the use of violence to manage relationships and 'solve' problems. It is, of course, this area of service provision which is often most lacking – there being few organisations that see it as their specific remit to tackle domestic violence between young people – and where there is the greater need to define and demonstrate what can ordinarily be achieved. This, as we hope to have shown, will not only require the application of methodologies able to access different audience segments before, during and after exposure to social marketing, but also the application of interpretive techniques alive to the most subtle shifts in viewers' identifications and a renewed sensitivity to the social complexity of the subject positions men negotiate around violence as they negotiate their masculinities. There is no avoiding, in both research and practice, the need to continue the dialogue with young men invested in particular imaginings of violence as heroic retribution that conceal their particular dependency on the very young women who carry the weight of their vulnerabilities in both physical and emotional ways. Acknowledging that many of these men too share an interest in seeing

perpetrators challenged and confronted might be one way of opening that dialogue in a form that ensures that it is neither concluded too rapidly, nor confined to questions about whether particular forms of sanction are more effective than others.

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